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ABSTRACT

Formed by a merger of two existing UNESCO programs--NATIS and UNISIST--a Division of the General Information Program (PGI) was created in 1977 to respond to problems involved in the development and promotion of scientific and technological information systems and services, as well as the development of national information infrastructures. This latter problem and the education and training of specialists in and users of information are its primary concerns. Other concerns include the promotion of information policies and plans formulation at national, regional, and international levels; the promotion and dissemination of methods, norms, and standards for information handling; and the development of specialized information systems in the fields of education, culture and communication, and the natural and social sciences. An International Council composed of 30 countries helps to ensure that PGI responds to the real needs and concerns of the 150 member states. PGI also provides a forum for UNESCO member states, UN agencies with information systems, and international non-governmental professional organizations. (RBF)

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THE THRUST OF UNESCO'S GENERAL INFORMATION PROGRAMME

by

Kenneth H. Roberts

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Kenneth H. Roberts

The thrust of Unesco's General Information Programme

Presented to

ALA International Relations Round Table
San Francisco, California

Tuesday 30 June 1981.

It is my privilege to bring to you the greetings of the Director-General of Unesco who sends warm wishes to the Association and to its International Relations Round Table for continuing success in all your endeavours.

It is for me personally a great pleasure to be on official mission in the United States where there exists the long tradition of library and information work in which I grew my own professional roots and where so much that is dynamic and forward-looking in librarianship originated and continues to emerge. It is satisfying to have an opportunity to attend ALA for the first time in many years and to speak here in the international context with which my work at Unesco is concerned.

There is in the air about us a general preoccupation with the nature of the information world of tomorrow. Questions abound concerning the application of new technologies to information handling and transmission, about the forcasted paperless society, the possible super-abundance of information, the scarcity of funds for adequate growth of collections and facilities. There is concern about the under utilization of certain existing systems and services. The prevailing note seems one of doubts and uncertainties about the future. This uncertainty is shared by our colleagues in many parts of the world.

Uncertainty, but there is certainly no lack of interest in the subject of "information". Information is now very widely recognized as an important resource for socio-economic and cultural development. Governments around the world are rapidly becoming more conscious of its importance. On the international level, every year witnesses the birth of new information systems and services within the United Nations or regional intergovernmental organizations. As interest in the management of information increases, as the cost of recording, selecting, organizing and disseminating information goes up, as governments around the world increase their involvement in the development of information services, many currents of influence come into play to shape the future. But in view of the advances made in new information-handling technologies such as mini-and-micro-computers and satellite communications, the large masses of recorded information which continue to be produced, and the hesitations expressed about the suitability of current services, the uncertainty we feel derives not from doubt about the need for some kind of services, but concerns their shape and their nature.

It seems important to recognize that many of these problems have a distinct international dimension. Self sufficiency in the information world is no longer possible. Even the isolation of nations may be detrimental. Real solutions to many problems in this area cannot be left to a few, but can be found only through the joint initiative of all peoples. Our interdependence will continue to grow. As an innovative and influential professional organization, the ALA will want to continue to seriously explore

the contribution it can make to shaping the future.

Unesco, at the international level, and the ALA at the national level, share many aims. I would like to spend a few minutes reviewing with you Unesco's work in the field of information transfer. Unesco takes a broad view of the question of the transfer of information from producer to user, - and it is our role to associate the whole spectrum of inter-related professions with the development of our programme. Librarians, of course, but also information scientists and other information specialists, archivists, publishers, extension workers and others.

It has always been Unesco's position that libraries - like museums, archives and documentation centres - preserve certain essential sources of knowledge and become thereby the repositories of irreplaceable elements of the cultural heritage of mankind. But, as the Director-General of Unesco underlined at the IFLA World Congress of Librarians in Brussels in 1977 : "Starting with books, but going beyond them, the library is thus led to transform itself gradually into a focal point for cultural action, a meeting place for reflection, a centre of cultural activity, encouraging the participation of the community and being stimulated in turn by that community, in a dialectic movement which is the very condition of democratic access to modern cultural media. But it is painfully obvious", he continued, "that many men and women are still far from being able to benefit from the intellectual and cultural enrichment offered by libraries, that the number of libraries is often ridiculously low in comparison with needs and that those which already exist have not all yet been able, or known how, to modify their structures, activities and methods or organization in order to become precisely 'accessible to all'."

Thus, if libraries, like museums and archives, constitute in a certain sense the memory of the world, they are not limited to the role of repository. Certainly the management of the collections and the handling and organization of information will continue to offer challenges. When the available statistics are considered, it becomes quickly apparent that the amount of recorded material to be managed is staggering. However, preoccupations with this central function should not distract the attention from the important related functions of selecting information and disseminating it to users.

It is less necessary to stress here in the United States than in many countries where the preservation function of libraries retains unquestioned predominance that surely the satisfaction of users'needs remains at the very centre of the library's mission. Satisfaction of the needs means the timely delivery of the right information. The form in which the material is held - the medium - is relatively unimportant.

For a long time to come libraries will continue to deal with tangible documentary material, as well as with information in audio-visual and in machine-readable forms. It is the relative proportion of these which may change. But this does not constitute a problem. The difficulty will come in the selection of information, the analysis and synthesis of that super abundance of material, the presentation of information for a wide variety of users in appropriate, often repackaged forms which respond to users'needs. The organization of information for easy use by all who need it will demand a deep understanding of the subject matter, and cultivation of the highly developed information skills required will remain a major challenge for the years ahead of us. The library and information profession will increasingly be called upon to play an intermediary role. The complicated technology which is being interposed between the producers and users of information, adds to the complexity of the expertise needed by the librarian or information specialist. In addition to the need for subject knowledge and information expertise, comes the demand to understand, interract with and adopt these new technologies. This constitutes the oppor-

tunity which confronts the profession to prepare itself for the future and to serve society by keeping under control a potentially chaotic information situation.

This is one aspect of the present situation as seen in the Unesco forum when its 150 Member States study and discuss the problems related to the transfer and exchange of information and the development and promotion of information systems and services at the national, regional and international levels.

Another aspect which needs to be underlined is the importance assigned by all countries, regardless of their relative level of development, to scientific and technological information. This is crucial to the growth and enrichment of all the sciences and it is acquiring immediate importance for the developing countries as one of the prerequisites for access to and the mastery of new technologies.

An international intergovernmental conference held in 1979 confirmed this fact. The work of the Unesco Intergovernmental Conference on Scientific and Technological Information for Development (UNISIST II) showed that it is important for librarians and other information specialists to distinguish and to foster two kinds of information flow :

The first takes place within the customary circuit of scientific and technical activities and involves providing information as a tool for developing science and technology and in diffusing new knowledge to users who are themselves scientists, engineers and technicians.

The second kind of information flow is much more intersectoral in character and concerns information as an essential element in the planning and execution of development programmes at all levels, including those of local governments and small business. This involves seeking answers for a whole spectrum of questions of economic, legal, social, administrative or cultural nature if wise programmes are to be conceived and implemented.

It was pointed out at the Conference that smoothly functioning information systems in both of these circuits are necessary to rapid development.

The UNISIST II Conference accented the importance of a user-centred strategy for libraries and other information services and in this perspective adopted a very broad view about those user groups which can be identified as actively involved in the advancement of science and technology and their application to development. These include scientists and technicians, certainly - but also decision makers in virtually all fields, development planners, teachers, workers, students, all who have a contribution to make to the development process in its broadest conception and who, in order to make their proper contribution, need access to information.

UNISIST II could be interpreted on one level as an appeal to the professional groups that compose the information field to join in a common objective, that of contributing to national socio-economic development.

It seems important to bring these developments to the attention of the International Relations Round Table, in particular since you may in some fashion, now and in the future, encourage and influence the shaping at the national and international levels of the services with which librarians are associated. The institutions connected with development include not only national, university and certain specialized libraries or documentation services but also public libraries which can provide needed reference services to many groups and children's libraries where good reading and study habits are most easily established and where research techniques can be taught to future workers in all fields. The acceleration of the pace of development depends in no small measure on

progress in this direction.

But perhaps at this point I should recall in a more systematic way the development of Unesco's programme in this field. Though many of you have been actively involved in Unesco's work and are quite familiar with its activities, I shall report in a very general way on the aims, objectives and types of activities conducted by Unesco's General Information Programme.

The General Conference of Unesco decided during its 19th Session at Nairobi in 1976 to reorganize the activities assigned previously to two programme sections. The first concerned with documentation, libraries and archives had been increasingly centred around a concept for the development of national information infrastructures which became known as NATIS. The other unit in the Science Sector of Unesco was engaged in the UNISIST intergovernmental programme for the development of scientific and technological information systems and services in a compatible fashion to enhance their interconnection and improve the transfer of STI. The merger of these programmes was decided in order to eliminate inevitable overlaps and duplication and to strengthen the effectiveness of Unesco's work in this area.

In implementation of that decision, the Director-General created early in 1977 a Division of the General Information Programme which is placed outside the sectoral structure of Unesco and under the Assistant Director-General for Studies and Programming, who himself reports directly to the Director-General of Unesco.

The responsiveness of PGI to the real needs and concerns of Member States is at least to some extent ensured by the fact that it has an Intergovernmental Council composed of representatives from 30 countries elected by the General Conference. The U.S. has so far been represented in the Council and its Bureau and has through this representation made a substantial contribution to the development of the programme. Orientation is further provided by a number of standing or ad-hoc working groups or committees made up of special sts drawn from all regions of the world which advise on and evaluate specific aspects of the programme. American specialists are active in these committees. Furthermore, PGI cooperates closely with international non-governmental professional organizations such as IFLA, FID, ICA, and International Council of Scientific Unions which have an opportunity to comment on its draft programmes and budgets.

The work of the Division of the PGI is structured around five themes :

1. Promotion of the formulation of information policies and plans at the national, regional and international levels ;
2. Promotion and dissemination of methods, norms and standards for information handling ;
3. Contribution to the development of information infrastructures, that is, institution and service building ;
4. Development of specialized information systems in the fields of education, culture and communication, and the natural and social sciences ;
5. Promotion of the training and education of specialists in and users of information ;

under each of the themes, particular attention is being paid :

(1) to the needs of all user groups and potential users who require information to make their proper contribution to the development process ;

(2) to a user-oriented approach in designing and developing information systems and services ;

(3) to the special needs of the least developed countries ;

(4) to the importance, not only of improving the flow of and access to world sources of information, but also of encouraging creativity, capacity for innovation and maximum utilization of local information resources ;

(5) to the need to facilitate the selection, use and adaptation of advanced information and communication technologies by Member States ;

(6) to the importance of evaluating those activities undertaken, and in general, sharing results of experiences with and among Member States.

The highest priority among the themes I just mentioned is ascribed to development of infrastructures and to education and training. However, particular importance continues to be attached to activities under the three other themes as prerequisites for the coherence of the programme and for action in support of the exchange and transfer of information, such as the global network for the exchange of technological information envisaged within the United Nations family.

The coordinating role of Unesco in this latter respect has been generally recognized, notably by the Secretary-General of the United Nations who declared when speaking some years ago of the various information systems and sectoral services available in the UN family :

"There is within the United Nations system one information programme of a general nature designed to provide a conceptual framework for the establishment of national and international scientific and technological information systems and services to facilitate access to the world information resources and to create the necessary conditions for systems inter'-connection and compatibility. This is Unesco's UNISIST."

The PGI Division is organized in six sections, four of which correspond to the principal themes I have enumerated.

The Section for Policy and Planning is primarily concerned with providing guidance to Member States in the formulation of national information policies and plans as part of their overall policies for national development. It also aims to promote regional cooperation in the methodological, organizational and managerial aspects of information policy and planning as well as to identify the obstacles to easy information flow and the ways to overcome them.

The Section for Norms and Standards works closely with ISO, the International Standard Organization. It is responsible for developing international standards for application in all areas of information activity, thus providing the tools necessary for the establishment of compatible information systems and services. It is concerned with standardization of methods and techniques thereby facilitating the interconnection of information systems and contributing to the creation of a conceptual framework for information transfer.

The Section for Training and Education is concerned with the development of the information manpower required for the establishment, management and operation of information systems and services and the efficient utilization of information resources.

A fifth is concerned with Programme Promotion and Documentation Support and is responsible, inter alia, for producing the Unesco Journal for Information Science, Libraries and Archives(UJISLAA) and the UNISIST Newsletter.

The sixth, the Operational Section, is responsible for ensuring the implementation of projects approved under Unesco's Participation Programme as well as those financed from extrabudgetary sources including the United Nations Development Programme.

The various sections carry out the responsibilities in their respective fields by means of such activities as : the publication of guidelines, norms and standards ; consultant missions ; the organization of seminars, workshops and other kinds of training programmes ; the provision of fellowships, equipment and financial support for meetings ; the organization of meetings, conferences and pilot projects.

The Programme and Budget for the period 1981-1983, approved by Unesco's General Conference in Belgrade in October 1980 emphasizes actions aimed at the full use of scientific, technological, economic, social; and cultural information as a basic resource for development. The budget foresees about $6,300,000 from Unesco's Regular Budget and about $7,500,000 from United Nations and other sources to a total of $13,800,000 for programme activities during the three year period.

The General Information Programme has now been in existence for more than 4 years. I believe that the results are on the whole very positive. The very existence of PGI has helped many Member States especially the developing countries, but also many so-called developed countries to begin the process of formulating a national policy and plan, to establish national structures and institutions for coordinating the national development of library and information infrastructures, to invest funds for such developments, to systematically organize the education and training of local manpower and to enter into regional collaborative efforts. PGI has offered a unique international forum for a constructive dialogue between Unesco's Member States, the many UN agencies with sectoral information systems and services and the various professional non-governmental organizations such as IFLA, ICA, FID, ICSU, ISO and others.

Serious attention is now being given to the preparation of Unesco's Medium Term Plan for 1984-1989 which will be adopted at a special session of the General Conference late in 1982. An intensive effort to identify basic world problems to which Unesco may be expected to contribute partial solutions has been underway in Member States. A parallel effort of reflection has been conducted at the Secretariat. One of the earliest sectoral activities undertaken in preparation for the writing of the draft plan was a Consultation Meeting organized by PGI last May in Toledo at the invitation of the Spanish authorities. The consultation brought economists, sociologists and development planners together with specialists in information handling including librarians, information scientists, computer specialists and archivists to analyze major problems in information transfer and utilization and the formulation of possible approaches to their solution. Their discussions have been summarized in a report which will provide useful input for the Medium-Term Plan.

It will come as no surprise to this group to learn that the group concluded that information is an important element in every problem-solving endeavour. It is also a factor in promoting innovation and creative activities at all levels. Therefore, systems and services that

provide timely and reliable problem-oriented information in forms convenient to all categories of users contribute vitally to development.

The experts found that the promotion of an "information culture" and of activities conductive to inculcating the habit of seeking and using information as a problem-solving resource from childhood - that is, at home and in the school-would be a useful approach to improving the utilization of information services to a wide range of user groups in a world of changing user needs and information handling capabilities is adequately trained personnel. The issue is especially critical in most of the developing countries. Therefore, the education and training of information personnel need attention and support at the national, regional and international levels. The report will be used to help identify certain priority areas in which PGI can hope to make a meaningful contribution during the balance of the '80s.

Since at present, information still flows principally from the more to the less developed countries, thus tending to perpetuate a serious imbalance, national organizations like ALA should redouble efforts to work with international professional organizations as well as with Unesco in contributing to programmes to meet newly identified needs and objectives in the rest of the world.

I should like to acknowledge our indebtedness to the many American specialists who, over the years, have given time and effort to contribute to international work, and through ALA, through IFLA, Unesco and other international organizations, as well as through bilateral agencies, have helped developing countries in the field of library and information work. It is only with the active assistance of men and women like yourselves that PGI's programme can be implemented.

If we often speak of a problem of over-abundance and information overload in the industrialized countries, it would not be excessive to speak of information starvation in many parts of the world. Those of you who attended the IFLA Conference in Manila last year may remember President Marcos'thoughtful speech at the opening session. Speaking of the information problems faced in South East Asia he said :"We live to-day in great awareness of profound imbalances in the sharing of resources and everybody knows this, and in the enjoyment also of the fruits of progress. But there is perhaps no imbalance and gap that impinge more deeply on the global predicament today than the imbalance in the flow of information and the lack of sharing of human discovery and knowledhe. For human knowledge, at this period of human history, also holds the key to the deliverance of peoples.

"In the advanced countries" he continued"the phenomenon of human knowledge is contemplated in such terms as "the memory explosion", "the information revolution", "information systems and science", and the bewildering communications gadgets of our age. And this has led the oft-quoted Marshall McLuhan to talk confidently of the reduction of the world into a global village.

"Yet, in the Third World, if we are to be candid, millions of our citizens hear less the explosion and more the dearth of human knowledge. While the "global village" is fast becoming a cliché to others, to us it just becomes yet another new idea whose reality we still have to comprehend and understand, and experience, if possible, in our lives."

The library profession is known for its generosity and a tradition of sharing. Well before international organizations and programmes began to invite collaboration, librarians all over the world had been participating in such activities for decades. Against the background of a changing environment and an uncertain tomorrow let us unite internationally to shape the future. Intensified collaboration is needed not only with all kinds of libraries of other countries, but also with practitioners of all related disciplines be they called information officers, archivists or documentalists And this at the national as well as international levels. The line of demarcation between these professions seem destined to become increasingly difficult to trace.